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## Senators push for state curriculum

By CECILIA LE / The News Journal  
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[photo caption:]

**Freshmen Michael Wisniewski (left) and William Ross study at Caesar Rodney High School. If two state senators are successful, students at schools statewide would share a curriculum, and a student moving to another district would have studied the same topics.**

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Concern that some school districts are not aligning their curricula properly with state standards led two legislators to introduce a bill that would require the state to create a uniform curriculum for Delaware's public schools.

The bill's sponsors say there's a gap between what students are taught and what they're expected to know, and that the current situation leads to students who change schools in the state to repeating material or arriving at the new school unprepared.

The bill's language does not specify that districts would be required to follow the state curriculum. But one of its sponsors says if all students are held to the same standards, districts should be similarly equipped to help them get there.

"Why should children in Seaford be taught differently than those in Brandywine Hundred?" said Rep. Stephanie A. Ulbrich, R-Newark South.

But some school districts argue they should have the freedom to develop a curriculum that best meets their students' needs and fear the bill further erodes local autonomy in an age of statewide and national standards.

Ulbrich said nothing in the proposed law would prevent schools from adopting curricula beyond what the state mandates. Local schools, she said, would still be free to select textbooks and educational materials.

Caesar Rodney School District Superintendent Harold Roberts said he feels his curriculum already lines up with state testing.

"We're very happy with our curriculum," Roberts said. "I wouldn't be inclined to support throwing that out to develop a new one. Different districts have different traditions and cultures, and should be able to create the program that best suits their individual students."

Delaware established standards for what students need to know in 1995. All students take state tests that determine whether they advance to the next grade. But districts are free to decide what curriculum would help students meet the state standards.

The state last year began working on a recommended curriculum scheduled to be complete in summer 2007. Districts already follow one curriculum for elementary science.

"Our intent was for it to be a recommended curriculum," said Secretary of Education Valerie Woodruff. "We're a pretty locally controlled state around here. I would not want to say everyone needs to be on the same page on the same day."

As for problems encountered by students switching schools or districts during the year, helping them adjust to a new school has always been a challenge, Roberts said.

When ninth-grader Olivia Ferrell and her family moved from Dover to the Caesar Rodney School District about three years ago, she found her classmates were at a different place in math instruction. She had to learn material in fractions and long division that they had already covered.

"Moving is a big deal," Ferrell said. "A lot of the kids knew more than I did."

But Roberts pointed out that students could get two different experiences from two teachers teaching the same curriculum across the hall from each other.

"Having a statewide curriculum isn't going to solve that problem," he said.

A decade ago when the state developed standards, many school districts feared their educational missions would eventually fall under total state control. The state created standards, then tests, and some worried a curriculum was next.

"There were concerns that the state would run everything," said Sen. David P. Sokola, D-Newark North, chair of the Senate Education Committee and a sponsor of the bill. "They said, 'Well, you might as well get rid of 19 districts and have one district.' "

But now, Sokola said, teachers, parents and administrators have approached him concerned some schools are not aligning with the standards.

"I'm in support of it," said Laurel School District Superintendent Keith Duda. "If we're holding kids to the same standard, we'd better make sure we're all on the same wavelength with curriculum.

"The state gives us the standards, but they're kind of vague. Where you go from there is kind of like a puzzle. Everyone is kind of putting together their own puzzle."

The bill does not say how specific the state curriculum would be. Would legislators want the state merely to provide broad guidelines or to design individual courses and lesson plans?

Sokola said those are matters for discussion when the Legislature reconvenes in March.

"The idea is to have another tool in the box for the districts to use," he said. "We don't want to do harm with this bill."

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